



The role of moral disengagement and cognitive distortions toward children among sex offenders

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This study investigated the individual and social characteristics, moral disengagement strategies and cognitive distortions toward children among 120 sex offenders in Italian jails. A semistructured interview was administered to collect data about family, social and medical histories, utilizing the Moral Disengagement Scale and the Hanson Sex Attitude Questionnaire. Results showed that sex offenders with sexual abuse trauma in their past had higher scores of moral disengagement and cognitive distortion toward children than sex offenders without sexual abuse trauma. In particular, the highest levels of moral disengagement, cognitive distortions related to children as sexual objects and sexual entitlement were shown by sex offenders who had been physically and sexually abused in their past. Moreover, moral disengagement predicted cognitive distortions related to children being sexy and sexual entitlement. Studying self-regulatory mechanisms and cognitive distortions is important to expand the literature about sexual behaviors committed by offenders and implement the promotion of effective and targeted treatment strategies.

Keywords: cognitive distortions; moral disengagement; sex offenders

In the literature, child sexual abuse is defined as sexual activities with children, including coercion, abuse of a position of trust or influence, or exploitation of a vulnerable or dependent child (Finkelhor, 1984; Murray, Nguyen, & Cohen, 2014). This form of sexual abuse is a heterogeneous phenomenon. An estimated 150 million girls and 73 million boys under 18 in the world have experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence involving physical contact. Other data suggest that 5.7 million are in forced or bonded labor, 1.8 million are in prostitution and pornography, and 1.2 million are victims of trafficking. However, a review of epidemiological surveys from 21 countries, mainly high- and middle-income countries, found that at least

7% of females (ranging up to 36%) and 3% of males (ranging up to 29%) reported sexual victimization during their childhood. According to these studies, between 14% and 56% of the sexual abuse of girls, and up to 25% of the sexual abuse of boys, was perpetrated by relatives or step-parents. In many places, adults are outspoken about the risk of sexual violence their children face at school or at play in the community, but rarely do adults speak of children's risk of sexual abuse within the home and family context. Recent data show that 1.2% of children younger than 11, 16.5% of 11- to 17-year-olds and 24.1% of 18- to 24-year-olds have experienced sexual abuse, including non-contact offenses, by an adult or a peer at some point in childhood (Radford et al., 2011).

In order to understand this phenomenon better, it is necessary to refer to individual and social characteristics of sexual offenders. However, it is crucial to refer to self-regulatory mechanisms of thoughts and actions in relation to sexual offenders' conduct. Some research shows that sexual abusers, and criminals in general, were inhibited by previous positive educational experiences and, conversely, facilitated by inadequate socialization experiences, inappropriate forms of punishment, abuse and neglect (Casey et al., 2017; Cuadra, Jaffe, Thomas, & DiLillo, 2014; McGrath, Nilsen, & Kerley, 2011; Pace et al., 2014). However, a few early studies (Groth & Birnbaum, 1979; Spinetta & Rigler, 1972) underlined how having suffered abuse can distort sex offenders' views and beliefs about sexual behaviors.

The psychological literature has also underlined how sex offenders make use of strategies to break free from the ethical codes imposed by society (Petrucelli, Barbaranelli, et al., 2017; Petrucelli, Simonelli, et al., 2017; D'Urso, Petrucelli & Pace, 2018a). Indeed, Bandura (1986, 1999) defined the construct of moral disengagement (MD) as a process of cognitive reconstruing or reframing of destructive behavior as being morally acceptable without changing the behavior or the moral standards. Bandura (1986) suggested that moral self-regulation may be neutralized through eight mechanisms: moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregarding or distorting the consequences, dehumanization and attribution of blame. However, 'the disengagement may center on (a) the reconstrual of the conduct itself so it is not viewed as immoral, (b) the operation of the agency of action so that the perpetrators can minimize their role in causing harm, (c) the consequences that flow from actions, or (d) how the victims of maltreatment are regarded by devaluing them as human beings and blaming them for what is being done to them' (Bandura, 1999, p. 194).

Several studies have generally associated MD to aggressive behavior (Bussey, Quinn, & Dobson, 2015; Paciello, Fida, Tramontano, Lupinetti, & Caprara 2008; Visconti, Ladd, & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2015) or considered MD an important key factor in the realization of criminal behavior (DeLisi, Peters, Dansby, Vaughn, Shook, & Hochstetler, 2014; Pace, D'Urso, & Zappulla, 2018). Carroll (2009), furthermore, showed how moral disengagement and moral judgment in male college participants are connected to attitudes that support rape. Indeed, the author has found that higher levels of moral disengagement are connected to attitudes supporting the offense, and lower levels of moral judgment are found in participants belonging to a fraternity. A study by Kiriakidis (2008) revealed that adolescents who had committed deviant acts showed a higher level of MD than adolescents who had not. Nevertheless, a study conducted by Petrucelli, Simonelli, et al. (2017) showed a difference between jailed participants in Italian jails, including both sex offenders and nonoffenders, and controls: Offenders generally displayed overall higher levels of moral disengagement. In particular, the results showed that sex offenders seem to make more use of moral disengagement mechanisms than nonoffenders.

Nevertheless, when moral disengagement is studied in sexual offenders, an insufficiently investigated factor is cognitive distortion, which plays an important role when dysfunctional behaviors and negative attitudes toward children are present in individuals who have committed sexual crimes. Indeed, the literature has underlined how cognitive distortions are more common among incarcerated persons (Wallinius, Johansson, Larden, & Dernevik, 2011). In particular, referring to sexual offenders, a study conducted by Ward and Casey (2010) pointed out that cognitive distortions are more evident in child molesters. Cognitive distortions (CDs) generally refer to maladaptive attitudes and beliefs, and problematic thinking styles (Passanisi & Pace,

2017; Ward, 2000; Ward, Hudson, Johnston, & Marshall, 1997). Some authors have suggested that CDs 'are the products of conflict between external reinforcements and internal self-condemnation' (Abel, Gore, Holland, Camps, Becker, & Rathner, 1989, p. 138). Also, problematic thinking styles are related to cognitive operations such as excusing, blaming and rationalizing sexually abusive actions, and, in effect, encompass the domain of cognitive processes (Ward, 2000). Furthermore, Ward (2000) underlined how CDs in sex offenders grow from underlying causal theories about the nature of their victims instead of resulting from independent beliefs. Cognitive distortions in sex offenders are beliefs developing from the personal recognition that their sexual interests contrast with social values and norms (Abel et al., 1984). Some studies have underlined the key role of cognitive distortions in the conduct of sexual abuse (Hanson, Gizzarelli & Scott, 1994; Wood & Riggs, 2008). In particular, the study of Hanson et al. (1994) showed that incest offenders present deviant attitudes in three areas: endorsing attitudes supportive of male sexual privilege, perceiving children to be sexually attractive and sexually interested, and minimizing the harm caused by sexual abuse of children. Ward, Gannon, and Keown (2006) have suggested seven typical types of cognitive distortions among rapist and child molesters: uncontrollability, dangerous world, entitlement (to commit abuse; e.g. sex offender perceives that he is superior to others because of his social role or individual characteristics), children as sexual beings, nature of harm (e.g. sexual offenders may not consider harmful the sexual behavior with children, they may think that there are many types of more harmful conduct that could be perpetrated toward children, and they may also minimize harm caused), and women as unknowable and as sexual objects. Several previous studies (Abel et al., 1984, 1989; Hayashino, Wurtele, & Klebe, 1995; Pithers, 1994; Stermac & Segal, 1989) have suggested that sexual offenders, particularly

child molesters, may have distorted beliefs that justify and legitimize sexual behavior with children and may serve as a shield for maintaining deviant behavior. A study conducted by Blumenthal, Gudjonsson, and Burns (1999) on participants who were sexual offenders (against children and adults) suggested that child sexual offenders show more cognitive distortions relating to sex with children. Moreover, cognitive distortions have been found associated with low levels of moral judgment (Van Vugt et al., 2008).

However, some studies have suggested that studying the self-regulation mechanisms and cognitive distortions of sex offenders may be of considerable importance for the promotion of effective and targeted treatment strategies (Petrucelli, Simonelli, et al., 2017; Van Vugt et al., 2008).

Relatively little attention has been given to the relationship between cognitive distortions and moral disengagement in sexual offenders. Indeed, in line with the international literature, the present explorative study, conducted on a convenience sample of sex offenders, attempted to explore the role of cognitive distortions toward children and moral disengagement strategies in persons who have committed sexual offenses, as well as individual and social characteristics of the sexual offender participants. This research can be taken as an innovative contribution to extending the literature about sex offenders' development of deviant thoughts and a possible key to considering what thought patterns could be a starting point for developing and increasing specific strategies of intervention.

Method

Procedure and participants

After having obtained permission from the Italian Department of Penitentiary Administration (DPA), the penitentiary heads were contacted, followed by the educational sector of the penitentiary in order to identify detainees who could be asked to participate in

the research. All participants were informed about the aim of the study and were assured that it was completely anonymous. After the participants had accepted, they signed a written informed consent form in order to guarantee their privacy and the anonymity of their personal information. After a semistructured interview, conducted with every participant, the Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS) and the Hanson Sex Attitude Questionnaire (STQ) were individually administered to all participants. All procedures, which involved human participants, were performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Participants of this study were 120 volunteers male sex offenders, recruited from penal institutes at Frosinone, Pesaro, Avellino, Benevento, Santa Maria Capua Vetere, Secondigliano, Vallo della Lucania and Cassino (Italy). In their past experience 31% of participants had both physical and sexual abuse, 20% had only physical abuse, 16% had sexual abuse, and 33% were not abused. The ages of participants ranged from 21 to 78 years ($M = 42.88$, $SD = 12.75$). With regard to nationality, 64.2% of participants were Italian, 34.2% were foreign, and 1.7% did not declare their origins.

Measures

The semistructured interview for having data connecting to an offense developed by De Leo, Petrucci and Pedata (2004) was used. It is not a diagnostic instrument but rather a form of data collection previously used in some research areas. However, the information collected refer to family, social and medical histories and the manner in which the deviant act was perpetrated.

The *Moral Disengagement Scale* (MDS; Caprara, Bandura, Barbaranelli, & Vicino, 1996) is composed of 32 items assessing the mechanisms underlying the moral disengagement and identified by Bandura (1999).

Participants were asked to rate their agreement to items using a 5-point Likert scale from *completely disagree* to *completely agree*. Cronbach's alpha in this study was .93.

The *Hanson Sex Attitude Questionnaire* (STQ; Hanson et al., 1994) measures cognitive distortions that support harassment toward children. The questionnaire was translated into Italian and then back-translated by a native speaker to ensure its comparability to the English version. Originally the questionnaire was composed of 47 items and five scales (Frustration, Affairs, Sexual Entitlement, Sex/Affection Confusion, Sexy Kids and Sexual Harm). For the present study, we used the short form composed of 29 items, and we considered two scales: Sexy Kids, which evaluates the perception of children as motivated sexually and sexually attractive, the perception of children as sexual objects (e.g. 'Some kids are big enough for enjoy sex with adults'; Cronbach's alpha was .91) and Sexual Entitlement, which evaluates attitudes to the right to male sexuality and the need to satisfy their sexual drives (contains items like 'A person should have sex whenever he needs it'; Cronbach's alpha was .87). Participants were asked to rate their agreement to items using a 5-point Likert scale from *completely disagree* to *completely agree*.

Data analysis

To examine moral disengagement and cognitive distortions (that kids are sexy and sexual entitlements) of sex offenders in relation to being physically and/or sexually abused, we performed a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA).

We also performed correlational analyses to examine the interrelations between moral disengagement and cognitive distortions.

Finally, to examine the contribution of moral disengagement on 'sexy kids' to sexual entitlement, we conducted two regression analyses using 'sexy kids' and sexual entitlement as dependent variables and moral disengagement as independent variable.

Results

Moral disengagement and cognitive distortions in relation to being physically and/or sexually abused

The overall MANOVA performed to examine moral disengagement and cognitive distortions ('sexy kids' and sexual entitlements) of sex offenders in relation to being physically and/or sexually abused was significant (Wilks's $\lambda = .80$, $p < .001$), with significant effects for moral disengagement, $F(3, 116) = 9.46$, $p < .01$, for 'sexy kids', $F(3, 116) = 10.67$, $p < .001$, and for sexual entitlement, $F(3, 116) = 10.95$, $p < .001$. Sex offenders with sexual abuse, in comparison to sex offenders without sexual abuse, showed higher scores in all the scales (Table 1). Moreover, higher levels of moral disengagement, 'sexy kids' and sexual entitlement were shown by sex offenders who had been contemporarily physically and sexually abused in their past.

Interrelations between moral disengagement and cognitive distortions

Correlations (Table 2) showed high positive relations between cognitive distortions ($r = .52$, $p < .000$) and between both of them (sexy kids and sexual entitlement) and moral disengagement (with sexual entitlements: $r = .51$, $p < .000$; with sexy child: $r = .31$, $p < .001$).

The contribution of moral disengagement on sexy kids and sex entitlement

The regression analyses conducted to examine the contribution of moral disengagement on cognitive distortions was significant both for 'sexy kids' ($R^2 = .10$), $F(1, 118) = 12.08$, $p < .001$, with moral disengagement emerging as positive predictor of 'sexy child' ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$), and for sexual entitlement ($R^2 = .26$), $F(1, 118) = 40.77$, $p < .000$, with moral disengagement emerging as positive predictor of sexual entitlement ($\beta = .51$, $p < .000$). Data are shown in Table 3.

Table 1. Descriptive analyses for all the variables.

	Physically and sexually abused (<i>N</i> = 37) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Physically abused (<i>N</i> = 24) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Sexually abused (<i>N</i> = 19) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Not abused (<i>N</i> = 40) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>F</i> (3, 116)	Observed range	Possible range
Moral disengagement	80.51 ^a (22.52)	69.33 (22.94)	67.21 ^b (22.37)	64.60 ^b (22.66)	9.46*	32–111	24–120
Sexy kids	23.00 ^a (10.81)	17.21 ^b (4.54)	21.00 (8.12)	17.00 ^b (5.67)	10.67**	12–53	12–60
Sexual entitlement	24.81 ^a (7.35)	19.88 ^{b,c} (6.91)	21.53 ^c (8.98)	17.00 ^b (5.74)	10.95**	9–45	9–45

Note: For each row, means that have no superscript in common are significantly different from each other, with $\alpha < .05$.

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Correlations between all the variables.

	Sexy kids	Sexual entitlement
Moral disengagement	.31**	.51***
Sexy kids		.52***

** $p < .001$. *** $p < .000$.

Table 3. Regression analyses predicting cognitive distortions from moral disengagement.

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Sexy kids	.11	.03	.31**
Sexual entitlement	.16	.03	.51***

** $p < .001$. *** $p < .000$.

Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate individual and social characteristics, moral disengagement strategies and cognitive distortions toward children among sexual offenders. It was proposed to highlight how these elements interact with each other and to determine whether some may be predictors of others. In other words, the aim was to explore the role of cognitive distortions toward children and moral disengagement strategies in people who have committed sexual offenses and also to assess whether the individual and social characteristics of participants played a role in the implementation of offenses.

The multivariate analysis of variance regarding moral disengagement and cognitive distortion demonstrated that individuals who have been physically and/or sexually abused enact greater moral disengagement strategies and greater cognitive distortions than those who have not. This result is consistent with the literature. Indeed, previous studies (Gorth, 1979; Spinetta & Rigler, 1972) have pointed out that abuse trauma affects sexual convictions and attitudes, and recent research (Casey et al., 2017; Cuadra et al., 2014; Fang & Corso, 2007; McGrath et al. 2011; Pace, Zappulla & Di Maggio, 2016; Zappulla et al., 2013) showed that sexual abuse is facilitated

in those who have experienced previous abuse or punishment. However, these findings suggest that abuse and maltreatment can be considered a risk factor in the onset of deviance or, more specifically, can influence wrong attitudes and beliefs toward children, their sexuality, and a wrong perception related to sexuality.

The results also showed that moral disengagement is linked to both kinds of cognitive distortion relating to the perception of the child as a sexual object and those relating to the fact that man must necessarily (almost as a right indeed) satisfy his sexual needs, suggesting that sex offenders who implement moral disengagement strategies also believe that children are sexually motivated and attractive. Such sex offenders thus find it legitimate to satisfy children's perceived sexual needs. In other words, moral disengagement for sex offenders seems to be a facilitator that justifies the ideas that children are sexual objects and that sex with children is not a wrong form of behavior. This result is in line with the literature, which has underlined that those who practice abusive behaviors with children have heavier cognitive distortions (Ward & Casey, 2010). Furthermore, child molesters may implement particular distortions capable of justifying and legitimizing their abusive behavior (Abel et al., 1984, 1989; Hayashino

et al., 1995; Pithers, 1994; Stermac & Segal, 1989).

Moreover, the fact that moral disengagement has been linked to the cognitive distortion related to the consideration of man as a person who has the right to have sex when he wants, and which leads to seeing sex almost as a necessity, could indicate how sex offenders, having socially acquired the tools to justify their wrong actions, can feed—even over time—beliefs that are now normalized. In other words, moral disengagement, in this case, may be a risk factor that can lead to the genesis of cognitive distortions that, once internalized, move the deviant action and therefore can incentivize the recidivism of the crime. The literature, in this regard, points out how the deviant action of the sex offender (e.g. child molester) is often moved by atypical cognitive maps and false beliefs (e.g. children or adolescents want to have sex like adults; having sex whenever you feel the need; all have the right to have sex) that may represent the relevant aspects of their inner world and provide the objectives that guide, then incorrectly, the action (e.g. Ward, Gannon & Keown, 2006; Petrucci, Barbaranelli, et al., 2017).

Although the present investigation provided valuable new insights about risk factors for sexual deviance and cognitive characteristics of sex offenders, a few important considerations should also be noted. First, the use of self-report questionnaires permits only a partial evaluation of the complexity of the variables considered in the study. This limit becomes particularly relevant concerning the social desirability of participants, especially those who have committed crimes. In other words, during data collection, the involved participants may have implemented strategies that would make them more desirable and allow them to comply with social norms. Future research could therefore benefit from the use of other types of measure (e.g. different informants, interviews, implicit tools and systematic interviews). Moreover, future

studies could investigate the effects of parents' care and the effects of institutionalization regarding cognitive distortions about children and emotional dysregulation of sexual offenders (Sevecke, Franke, Kosson, & Krischer, 2016).

Second, it is not possible to generalize these results to all sex offenders. Nevertheless, despite the limitations of the study and to those suggested in the literature (D'Urso, Petrucci, & Pace, 2018b; Van Vugt et al., 2008), when studying mechanisms of moral disengagement and cognitive distortions of sexual offenders, it is important to identify and promote effective and targeted treatment strategies. However, this research represents a considerable contribution to extending the literature, because to find and assess sexual offender participants is not easy in Italian jails.

In addition, in relation to what emerged, it might be useful to pay more attention to cognitive distortions that regulate behavior and that are often underestimated by placing more emphasis on the purely emotional component. Future studies may indeed evaluate mediation or moderation models by considering the relationship between cognitive and emotional aspects and the infant background of sexual offenders. In conclusion, this study can be seen as an innovative contribution and a possible key to interpreting which thinking patterns could be a starting point for developing and increasing specific intervention strategies as well as for relapse prevention.

Ethical standards

Declaration of conflicts of interest

Giulio D'Urso has declared no conflicts of interest.

Irene Petrucci has declared no conflicts of interest.

Valentina Costantino has declared no conflicts of interest.

Carla Zappulla has declared no conflicts of interest.

Ugo Pace has declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study

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